



MENA “Bringing the World Home” Conferences Conference Series Overview, Spring 2007

In spring 2007, Americans for Informed Democracy (AID) and the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) joined with four regional partners to convene conferences in Jordan, Egypt and Morocco, bringing together 152 young Americans and Middle Easterners to discuss America’s impact on political reform in the region. In these conferences, the participants discussed the U.S. – Middle East relationship, the consequences of American policies in the Middle East, and how the U.S. could better support democratization in the region. In small group discussions, the participants jointly developed, debated and ratified policy recommendations for the U.S. government, regional governments, the media, and civil society organizations.

The conferences provided an open forum for young Americans and Middle Easterners to directly engage each other about U.S. democracy strategy and about Middle Easterners’ hopes and ambitions for political reform in their countries. The conferences included thematic panel discussions featuring regional experts, small group discussions to formulate policy recommendations, and a general session to debate and vote on the recommendations. Conference workshops also trained participants on how to hold follow-up events on their campuses and in their communities to discuss the policy recommendations and their experiences.

The conferences featured prominent experts on political reform in the Middle East, including Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan, the U.S. Foreign Service Political Counselors in Jordan and Morocco, officials from the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute, Senator Laila Sharaf of Jordan, Ashraf Swelam of the Egyptian Foreign Ministry, the Palestinian delegate to the Arab League, officials from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the president of the woman’s branch of Jordan’s Islamic Action Front, the ranking member of the Political Bureau of Morocco’s *Mouvement Populaire* party, Gregor Meiering of the Open Society Institute, and many other political party leaders, civil society activists, government officials, diplomats, academics, and democracy activists.



Jordan conference participants with Prince Hassan bin Talal.

The conferences received extensive press coverage in the region, including a 16-minute feature on the satellite television station *al-Jazeera*. Some of the participants have already started to organize follow-up events, including a follow-up conference for 31 young Americans and Moroccans in Fez who were unable to attend the first conference. The conferences were patterned on AID's "Bringing the World Home" conference series in Europe.

GOALS & PROGRAM

The three conferences were intended to foster a dialogue between Americans and Middle Easterners about how the U.S. can better support political reform in the region. Despite Administration rhetoric about U.S. promotion of democracy in the Middle East, many Middle Easterners believe that the U.S. does not truly support democracy in the Middle East.¹ The war in Iraq, which the administration has attempted to justify in the name of democracy, has only reinforced the negative association in Middle Easterners' minds between American policy and democracy. The conferences' panel discussions, keynote addresses, and small group discussions provided a forum for young Americans and Middle Easterners to discuss how American policy affected political reform in the region and how the U.S. could more effectively support the development of democracy.

The conferences were also intended to be an incubator and training ground for young American and Middle Eastern activists and advocates. By jointly developing policy recommendations in small groups, then debating and voting on them in the general session, the participants learned about democracy and then practiced it. The policy recommendations provided a concrete foundation upon which the participants can organize additional events and advocacy campaigns.



Participants at the Morocco conference.

The conferences were also designed to equip the participants to "Bring the World Home" by conducting follow-up events after they returned to their home campuses and communities. Laurel Rapp of Americans for Informed Democracy attended each conference and conducted training sessions for the participants. One workshop, "Talking About Global Issues with Your Peers," reviewed the best strategies for talking about global issues with non-expert audiences, using the approach of the highly acclaimed *U.S. in the World* guide that conveys current research and expert insight to non-expert audiences. This workshop enabled participants to analyze and speak about global issues more effectively with friends, family, and the public. A second workshop, "Organizing an International Discussion," prepared participants with the tools to plan dialogues between their community and the Middle East. The workshop focused on strategies to identify a community's relationship to global issues

¹ For example, according to a 2006 survey, when asked about the obstacles to democracy in Jordan, the third-most popular choice (out of 14 choices) was "The U.S. does not want democracy in Jordan." Center for Strategic Studies, University of Jordan. "Democracy in Jordan – 2006" public opinion poll. The poll sampled 1115 respondents, yielding a margin of error of +/-3%.

and directed the participants to detailed methods of carrying out the discussion (i.e. a comprehensive videoconferencing toolkit).

PANEL TOPICS

The conferences' panel topics included, among others:

- Measuring Democracy
- Engaging Political Islam
- Woman's Democratic Participation
- Regional Impacts on Reform
- The Role of U.S. Democracy Promotion Organizations
- U.S. Foreign Policy in the Context of Local Relations



Participants at the Jordan conference develop policy recommendations in small group discussions.

PARTICIPANTS

American participants included students at Oklahoma State University, Middlebury College, the University of Missouri-Columbia, Syracuse University, Georgetown University, Brown University, Stanford University, Trinity College, and Ohio University. Other participants were recent graduates of Duke University, Emory University, Tufts University, the University of Alabama, and Villanova University. The participants also included a social studies teacher at Edward R. Murrow High School in Brooklyn, New York; Fulbright fellows conducting research in Israel, Jordan, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates; young professionals from the U.S. Institute of Peace and the National Democratic Institute; and a Rhodes Scholar.

The American participants traveled at their own expense from the U.S., Slovenia, Brussels, France, England, Spain, the United Arab Emirates, Damascus, and Jerusalem (among other places) to attend the conferences.

Middle Eastern participants included current students at Jordan University, Amman University, Al al-Bait University, Cairo University, Ain Shams University, and the American University in Cairo, as well as Ph.D students at the London School of Economics and the American University of London. Middle Eastern participants also included employees of the Aqaba Development Corporation, a lawyer with International Business Legal Associates, a youth relations officer for the Fastlink cellular phone company, political party activists, an international affairs researcher in Queen Rania's office, a Jordanian Fulbright fellow who will be conducting his research in the U.S. in 2007-2008, and numerous alumni from the State Department's PLUS program who spent two years studying at American universities.



Two participants at the Morocco conference discuss the panelists' remarks.

SPEAKERS

Speakers at the Morocco conference included Counselor for Political Affairs at the U.S. Embassy, Craig Karp; Director of the *Centre Marocain d'Etudes Stratégiques* Mohammed Ben Hammou; Chief of Party to USAID/SUNY Parliamentary Support Project, Julia Demichelis; Senior Program Manager from the National Democratic Institute, Eric Duhaime; ranking member of the Political Bureau and National Campaign Team of the *Mouvement Populaire* Party, Lahcen Haddad; and several other activists representing Morocco's vibrant civil society organizations.

Speakers at the Egypt conference included Alistair Baskey, of the U.S. Foreign Service, Ashraf Swelam of the Egyptian Foreign Ministry, Dr. Jerry Leach, Director of the Center for American Studies at AUC, Fadel Soliman, the Director of the Bridges Foundation, Mohamed Sobeih, the Palestinian delegate to the Arab League, Jawad Nabolsi, a member of the Ministry of Youth's committee on Leadership, and as well as several young activists from a wide array of political backgrounds.

Speakers at the Jordan conference included Prince Hassan ibn Talal, who delivered the opening keynote address; Christopher Henzel, the Political Attaché at the U.S. Embassy, who gave the closing keynote address; Mohamed Arslan, a member of parliament from Zarqa; Mara Galaty, the democracy officer for USAID Jordan; Senator Laila Sharaf; Ahmed Shannaq, the Secretary-General of the National Constitutional Party; Ibtesam Al-Atiyat of the United Nations University; Roula Attar of the National Democratic Institute; Arwa Kaylani, the president of the women's branch of the Islamic Action Front; Mohammed Abu Rumman, a columnist for *al-Ghad* newspaper; Paul McCarthy of the International Republican Institute; and Gregor Meiring, the Open Society Institute's MENA Coordinator.



Members of the “Measuring Democracy” panel address the Amman conference participants. From left: Sen. Laila Sharaf, Ali Bibi, Mohammad Arslan.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The American and Middle Eastern conference participants jointly developed and ratified dozens of policy recommendations directed towards the U.S. government, regional governments, the media, and civil society organizations. The recommendations are a concrete foundation upon which the participants can build subsequent conferences or events on their campuses or in their communities.

The participants agreed on the following recommendations, among others:

- “We recommend the creation of political space, free of any legal consequences, for debate and dialogue about democratic processes that will create an environment more conducive to citizens’ political participation.” (Morocco)
- “Any student council in a public school or university should be elected by popular vote.” (Jordan)
- “U.S. foreign policy and democracy promotion should include a more tailored approach that considers the needs of the people in each country.” (Morocco)
- “We recommend that the U.S. engage those Islamist individuals and groups that express a credible willingness to participate in democracy by offering the same dialogue to Islamist reformers that is currently offered to other reformers. Even if dialogue is refused, the U.S. should avoid stigmatizing Islamist politics in official rhetoric.” (Jordan)
- “We encourage the United States and Jordan to invest in and support local Jordanian initiatives that would significantly encourage women to participate in the political process through the organization of training sessions on campaign strategy, fundraising, media relations, and related fields, and encourage both men and women to promote the engagement of women in the political sphere, through public awareness campaigns.” (Jordan)

PRESS COVERAGE

The *al Jazeera* satellite television station broadcast a 16-minute piece on the Morocco conference on its May 25 “Maghreb News Bulletin.” The segment featured a 4-minute program taken from over five hours of footage taken during the event, including interviews with conference speakers and participants. The remaining 12 minutes consisted of a live debate among James Liddell of POMED, Mohammed Ben Hammou of the Moroccan Center for Strategic Studies (a co-sponsor of the conference), and Almokri Abu Zaid, a Member of Parliament from the moderate Islamist party, the Party for Justice and Development.



The Arabic satellite television station *Al-Jazeera* broadcast a 16-minute program on the Morocco conference.

The BBC World Service Radio broadcast two bulletins about the Morocco conference on May 26-27. The programs quoted American and Moroccan participants about solutions to terrorism.

Morocco’s leading Islamist daily *Attajdid* carried front page coverage of the conference. The Arabic daily, closely affiliated with the Party for Justice and Development (PJD), used the participation of U.S. Diplomat Craig Karp to frame the article—giving special attention to the critical questions he received as well as reminding readers of the recent policy blunders made by the U.S. Embassy in Morocco.

The Morocco conference was also covered in *Liberacion*, a socialist French-language daily associated with the *Union Socialiste des Forces Populaires* Party; *Le Matin*, a pro-palace French-language daily; and *Le Journal*, Morocco's leading French-language news weekly, in which conference organizers James Liddell and Laurel Rapp authored a piece addressing some points made in the *Attajdid* article.

The Jordan conference was covered in all of Jordan's daily newspapers on Friday, April 20, including the English-language *Jordan Times* and the Arabic *Al-Dustour*, *Al-Ghad*, *Al-Rai*, and *Al-Arab al-Yawm*. A follow-up article about the conference, including quotes from organizers Sami Hourani and Ariella Viehe and participants Kathleen Keiser, Lina Ejeilat, Andrew Goodhart, and Matthew MacLean, was published in *Al-Dustour* newspaper on Saturday, April 28.



An article describing the conference's first day, in the Jordanian daily newspaper *al-Dustour*.

The conference received international coverage through Radio Sawa. Amman-based correspondent Mahmoud Zawawi broadcast two news bulletins, the first of which included remarks by Mohammad Arslan, and the second with remarks by Mara Galaty. Amman-based *Luxury* magazine also published an article about the conference.

Articles about the Cairo conference were published in the *Christian Science Monitor* and Cairo's *Daily Star*.

LOCAL PARTNERS

Centre Marocain d'Etudes Strategiques ("The Moroccan Center for Strategic Studies") is an independent center for information, consulting, studies, and analysis on international and strategic issues based in Rabat, Morocco. Founded in 2004, the MCSS undertakes academic studies in a variety of fields with the goal of facilitating a comprehensive understanding of events at the international, national, regional, and local levels. It is an open space for trainings, discussions, and information sessions that attract specialists, research professors, and others interested in these issues. Among other objectives, the MCSS aims to facilitate a better understanding of the current affairs across the long-term.



Prince Hassan bin Talal speaks with former United Nations Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali before delivering his opening remarks to the Amman conference.

The Center for American Studies at the American University in Cairo is an academic center focusing on the cultural, political and intellectual life of the United States. **Model Egyptian Parliament** at the American University in Cairo is a student organization dedicated to political debate and discussion.

Al-Urdun Al-Jadid (“New Jordan”) Research Center (UJRC) is an independent non-governmental organization working for sustainable development in Jordan and the Arab World through developing scientific research, administering discussions and dialogues, organizing conferences and workshops, and exchanging expertise and experience with other regional and international organizations. UJRC pursues its objectives through forums for dialogue and discussion, and by developing general policies and legislations, through workshops, brainstorming sessions, conferences, and seminars.

Americans for Informed Democracy (AID) is a non-partisan 501(c)(3) organization that brings the world home through programming on more than 1,000 U.S. university campuses and in more than 10 countries. AID fulfills its mission by coordinating town hall meetings on America's role in the world, hosting leadership retreats, and publishing opinion pieces and reports on issues of global importance. Through these efforts, AID seeks to build a new generation of globally conscious leaders who can shape an American foreign policy appropriate for our increasingly interdependent world.

The Project on Middle East Democracy is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to examining the impact of American policy on political reform and democratization in the Middle East. Through dialogue, policy analysis, and advocacy, POMED hopes to promote understanding of how genuine, authentic democracies can develop in the Middle East and how the U.S. can best support that process.